

**“For the Sake of Ten” - - - Katherine A.
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church - - - July 28, 2019
Genesis 18:20-32**

My name is Katherine, as you have probably gleaned by now. I have been a resident of Baltimore for about a year now and I work as a Mitigation Specialist. If you all were my family, or people who had known me over the years, this is the time you would ask me WHAT is a mitigation specialist and HOW did this happen to me? And as I move through the text today, I plan to answer both of those questions for you in very abbreviated form, because they are a part of how I engage with both faith and scripture today. And because we are, in a way, family, right?

This week, for me, it has been a gift to get to spend a lot of time in this morning’s texts.

It has been quite a while since I have been in a pulpit. I assumed, naturally, because I am out of practice, that God and the Revised Common Lectionary would give me an easy, peasy, happy Summer Sunday kind of text. God laughed, and instead this week you and I are here to engage with a story of the conversation between God and Abraham that precedes the utter destruction by God of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Some of us are very familiar with the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. I will give you a spoiler alert now if you are not, because what is to come for these cities, after today’s text, depicts a version of God that is hard to handle for those of us who like the idea of a loving, redeeming, parental creator.

In just a few chapters, these sinful cities will, after all of this, be plunged into firey, sulfuric destruction.

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is made particularly difficult by the ways in which the destruction of these cities has most traditionally been understood and preached. When I was growing up, the popular read of the Sodom and Gomorrah texts explained that the sin toward which God was so ruthless was the sin of sexual immorality. The popular preaching was that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah had become so depraved in their sinfulness that God was forced to destroy them. For many churches and many pulpits homophobia has been the arena where fearful and “well-meaning” pastors wielded the Sodom and Gomorrah weapon.

And I have to say, minus the fixation on something as wild as restricting love by gender, there are some days that I understand about the impulse to find an OTHER who represents such depraved immorality that *Even God* thinks utter destruction is the only way.

In 2019, there are some days when I look around and I wonder if maybe we do, in fact deserve to be destroyed. It can be hard not to.

But for now, I want to take a step back from the destruction with which I associate Sodom and Gomorrah to look closely at the conversation that Abraham and God are having – the meat of the Genesis text that Paul read to us a few minutes ago. I think this conversation and HOW God and Abraham have it matters. I think what we learn about God in this conversation says as much about God as the ability to be destructive does.

This is the part where I have to tell you unfortunately this will not be a sermon with easy answers or neat bows. This scripture is not a text with easy answers or neat bows. I hope that will be okay. I suspect it will. I think that when Michele invited me to preach she did it knowing that I am not exactly an easy answer and neat bow kind of pastor or kind of person.

The work that I am doing now is work I have found fairly recently. Just About two-ish years ago, I was a deeply passionate Seminarian about to finish up dual seminary and social work degrees

and launch out into the world of the Presbyterian Church looking, ordination bound, and pondering what the right call would be for me.

I had just one more internship between me and graduation and becoming the very loud preacher lady my Presbyterian parents had always dreamed of when I wandered into the Capital Punishment Clinic at the University of Texas Law School. In this Clinic, students and lawyers work together on the appeals cases of men who have been sentenced to Death in Texas. The clinic takes on a social work intern who uses their skills to help develop the mental health and interpersonal aspects of our clients' cases. At the time, I knew next to nothing about the Death Penalty and had decided that this would be a fun, "random" type of learning experience to build some new skills.

Well, a four-month internship and one minor anxiety attack later, I realized that a pesky God thing was happening to me once again. There was a change happening in the way my heart was feeling pulled to participate in justice, to participate in loving my neighbors.

Fast forward a little bit, and Here I am. Here is where "mitigation specialist" comes in. Out of context, these words seem kind of meaningless, and at Advancing Real Change, or ARC, where I work, we often use Life History Investigator instead – it at least gives most people a flavor you recognize.

In short, I spend time with incarcerated clients, mostly clients who are at risk of being sentenced to the death penalty. I listen to my clients as much as possible and I build supportive relationships with them and I judge as little as possible. And then I go and I sit with every family member, friend, teacher, enemy, neighbor I can find and I listen. I get to know people and I try to understand. And then My colleagues and I collect every record you can think of for our client

and three generations of their family. And with all these puzzle pieces gathered along the way, we participate in my client's legal defense. We think about how to share our client's story.

We wonder things like:

What is it about my client that might be meaningful enough to a decision maker (a judge, a jury, a committee of lawyers) that the decision maker might see my client not just for a horrible crime, but as a human, however flawed? What is it about my client that has gone unseen? What experiences have they had with trauma, mental illness, disability, abuse, violence, poverty? What experiences have they had with love? Who loves them? Who do they love? What STORIES will help to share that my client, whoever he or she is, is WORTHY of a punishment less than death? What will save his life?

We think about STORIES that can help someone feel who our client is because we know that he is more than the crime he is accused of. And we think about narratives because we are convinced – even in a legal system that makes things as logical, as political, as black and white, as possible – it is emotion, feeling and human connection that can drive decision makers.

So in an odd way, then, I relate to the conversation that Abraham and God are having in this text. The business of trying to understand stories that involve trauma, violence, and struggle is messy, muddy, and complex. Work that always starts after the unthinkable tragedy of a homicide is messy, muddy, and complex.

I can relate to a story that is muddy, messy, and complex and the Genesis text for today is one of those.

Genesis 18:20 opens with God making a statement to Abraham. God is focused on an outcry. The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so bad and their sin so grievous, God says, that I've just got to go down there and see it.

In some versions of this text, this word outcry is replaced with Outrage. God hears outrage, and outcry, and we would do well to notice that this immediately gets God going.

This word, this "outcry" is used on several occasions across the Hebrew bible. Nahum Sarna,¹ was a twentieth century Jewish scholar who spent a career translating the Genesis and Exodus books of the Old Testament. Sarna looks at the Hebrew word for outcry here, Tse-ah-kah, and notes that this word is almost always used to connote not just rage but specifically the anguish of people experiencing oppression. Tse-ah-kah, Sarna explains is filled with poignancy and passion. Tse-ah-kah is not just any outcry but one against the horrors of injustice. It is the call of those who are being harmed, hurt, by a sin that has to do with disparities, vulnerability, marginalization.

Sarna argues, and I agree, that this is the right way to understand the outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah. He points to Ezekiel's summary of Sodom and Gomorrah in Ezekiel 16:49. "Only this, Ezekiel proclaims, was the sin of your sister Sodom: arrogance! She and her daughters had plenty of bread and untroubled tranquility yet she did not support the poor and needy."

God has been listening. God is ruffled by injustice. God is getting riled up.

God cares about an outcry. God has to know exactly what this is.

¹ Sarna, N. M. (2001). *Genesis: the traditional Hebrew text with the new Jps translation = Be-rêšît*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.

God goes on, all riled up, to respond to Abraham as Abe engages God in a back and forth. Abraham seems frantic, almost desperate. God is angry, and Abraham is nervous. What if there are righteous people down there in the city? What if, among all of those messed up, horrible, no good, very bad sinners, there are some people who aren't so complicit to the injustice of it all?

Suddenly, this conversation turns into a sort of odd logic problem as Abraham is still trying to get a hold on just what God's idea of justice looks like. How many righteous must be among the sinners in order for God to call off this plan to burn them all to bits? To put it another way, How many innocent persons must be mixed in with the guilty before throwing them all away is not even doing justice at all?

Back and forth Abraham questions God and God declares what number of people would make mercy worth it. From fifty. To forty five. God would find thirty righteous people enough reason to choose mercy. From thirty to twenty. From twenty to ten. And we know that For the sake of ten, God would not destroy the masses. If there were 10 who deserved God's mercy, that'd be enough for God.

God has a specific number in mind, it would appear, and that number is small.

As God tells Abraham these numbers, for the second time in this story we are forced to notice that whether in investigating the truth about the sins of these cities or in computing this odd how much righteousness equation - - God just does not seem to be an abstract, big picture sort of Judge.

Before just writing the whole lot off, God moves **towards** Sodom and Gomorrah. God has got to understand this sin. The details of the righteousness are equally important. This God, who is great and powerful and capable of doing whatever God wants and wiping whole cities off the

map.... Well as it turns out, this is a God who still wants to get down there in the muddy messy heart of it all.

God is a Judge who declares that there would only need to be 10 to elicit mercy, just a few righteous to make the collateral damage seem like a bad idea.

This is a God who wants to be intimate with the injustice God observes and with intimate the justice God doles out.

I have to wonder, then, what this means for us, as people of faith living in some complicated times? What does it mean to love and serve a God who cares to have such close, intimate contact with the messy, muddy realities of justice and injustice?

As of the beginning of July, there were 2,632 persons living on death rows in the United States, across 31 states and in the Federal and US Military Systems. Whether or not execution looms with immediacy over the heads of those persons condemned depends entirely upon politics.

On Thursday, this political limbo changed significantly for the 62 individuals sentenced to death in the federal system. The Department of Justice has declared their intent, after about 17 years, to resume executions, with five men scheduled to be killed by lethal injection between now and January. In our office, this news came with a notice that a date has been set to execute one of our clients. As I have worked my own cases this week, I have watched my colleagues who personally know and love this client wrestle with grief as they get ready to fight for his life.

There is a lot of mud here. A lot of messiness. No Easy Answers. No Easy justice. I hope I will be brave enough to keep moving toward it.

But the insight this text shares for how God thinks about injustice are not just applicable in the “Justice system”, I don’t think.

The call to look closely at uncomfortable, messy, complexity is a part of every area of our society that involves disparity, marginality, and pain.

This is a call on us to wonder this week where we need to look at each other with uncomfortably close and thoughtful eyes.

As God’s people, we are challenged to remember that for God, going out of one’s way to get down in the mud and look around and try to understand injustice is an essential first step.

We are challenged to see with the heart of a God who commits to changing course not just if it is necessary for the sake of the majority, but for the sake of the smallest numbers of God’s people. For the sake of ten. This week, I have to think maybe even for the sake of five.

We are challenged to bravely move in, even when there are things about God we still do not understand.

Amen.